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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000597

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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015

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SUBJECT: ASAD INSISTS ON NEED FOR AMBASSADOR TO RETURN

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: In a one-on-one with his American biographer, President Bashar al-Asad May 30 underscored the need for the return of the U.S. ambassador to Damascus, according to the biographer, David Lesch. Asad discounted the importance of the May 3 Sharm meeting between FM Mu'allim and the Secretary. He expressed interest in peace negotiations with the Israelis, if the USG participated as a broker, but questioned whether the Olmert government was strong enough to proceed. Asad was aware that his views would be probably be shared with the USG and likely offered these points to try to influence U.S. policy-makers. End Summary.

¶2. (C) ASAD ASKS FOR RETURN OF U.S. AMBASSADOR: In a one-on-one in early June with his American biographer, David Lesch, President Bashar al-Asad emphasized the need for the return to post of the U.S. Ambassador, according to Lesch in a readout to A/DCM. Asad noted that return as a key first step, with little engagement likely without it. Asad ruled out any cooperation, for example, on counter-terrorism/security cooperation (i.e., intelligence sharing), an area where he believed the two sides had a common interest, if the U.S. did not return its ambassador to Damascus, said Lesch. The return of an ambassador would signal that the USG was interested in political engagement, or "broader dialogue," Asad insisted. If such a dialogue began, Syria was in a position to contribute to political stability in Iraq and Lebanon and also offer assistance on Palestinian issues, as Asad claimed it did on the Mecca agreement, supporting negotiations in Damascus that had developed into a full-flown agreement in Saudi Arabia.

¶3. (C) RELATIONS WITH THE U.S.: According to Lesch, Asad dismissed of the May 3 Sharm meeting between the Secretary and FM Mu'allim as not significant. Asad also expressed exasperation, saying the U.S. insisted on restricting the talks to the Iraq border issue: "How long have we been talking about that one issue?" Asad asked rhetorically. According to Lesch, Asad also discounted the importance of the Sharm talks because of his assessment that the USG is divided about proceeding with any dialogue with Syria. Asad claimed that he had heard this message directly from more than one Arab foreign minister, who had stated to him that the visit to the region by the U.S. Vice-President in the same general time-frame as the Sharm meeting, as well as statements made by USG officials, publicly and privately, were indicative of these differences. According to Lesch, Asad reported that he has "given up" on the Administration, believing that it will not take any significant steps to decrease the isolation of Syria or re-engage with it.

¶4. (C) FATAH AL-ISLAM AND THE TRIBUNAL: Asad denied any Syrian link with Fatah al-Islam and insisted the SARG is happy to see the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) taking on what he described as an Al-Qaida-linked enemy of Syria. However, Asad cautioned that the LAF needed to avoid "the trap" of entering Nahar al-Barid camp and getting bogged down, a move that could spark unrest in other Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Regarding the formation of the Lebanon tribunal, Asad repeated standard SARG points, noting that the tribunal is strictly a Lebanese affair and that Syrian sovereignty trumps any such proceeding.

¶5. (C) RELATIONS WITH THE SAUDIS: Regarding other foreign policy issues, Asad noted that relations with the Saudis had improved somewhat, but only at the very top, with King Abdullah. nearly all Saudi officials below Abdullah, including key princes, remained anti-Syrian, Asad indicated, to underline that the improvement in relations was not nearly as significant as some people thought.

¶6. (C) NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE ISRAELIS: On the prospect of negotiations with the Israelis on the Golan, Asad denied any back-channel negotiations and also insisted that Syria did not want to move forward with the Israelis without the U.S. as a broker for the two sides. He also described PM Olmert as too weak -- and Israel too divided -- for forward movement on negotiations with Syria, although Israel remained united and strong enough to make war with Syria, added Asad. He also underlined the importance Syria attached to getting the occupied Golan Heights back. Asad noted that Syria had "learned a lot" about how to handle Israel's army by watching the way Hizballah fought last summer in Lebanon. When asked

DAMASCUS 00000597 002 OF 002

why Syria was cooperating so closely with Iran, Asad claimed that Iran was supporting Syria in its struggle to get back its land. If other countries helped Syria on this key national interest, Syria would cooperate and develop good relations with them.

¶7. (C) BASHAR'S MOOD: Lesch described Asad as buoyant after his referendum "victory" and what Asad had described as an invigorating but exhausting run-up to the vote. Asad acknowledged the artificiality of the exercise to an extent, saying that he knew people would not vote "no." The real no-votes were cast by those who chose not to vote, Asad told Lesch.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Lesch is a professor of Middle Eastern studies at Trinity College in San Antonio, Texas. He has visited Syria, and met with the Asad, at least once a year since Asad granted him an initial audience in the spring of 2004 and agreed to cooperate on the biography Lesch was then planning to write. Asad was aware that his views would be probably be shared with the USG and likely offered these points to try to influence U.S. policy-makers. We have heard these this SARG view about the importance of the return of the ambassador to post from a variety of our Syrian interlocutors. It was also raised during recent visits by U.S. members of Congress.

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